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Soviets aren't leaving Afghanistan

While keeping the Pakistan government off balance at the U.N. talks in Geneva with his token offer to reduce by 6,000 the more than 115,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev is moving slowly but steadily to consolidate Soviet control over the land that lies between the Oxus River and the Khyber Pass.

Determined to transform Afghanistan from an independent and neutral buffer state into a convenient stepping stone toward the Indian Ocean, the Soviets have already built strategically placed and well-defended airfields that put their fighters and bombers within range of the Strait of Hormuz.

In a recent unclassified study done for the Reagan administration by the best-qualified outside experts under the auspices of the Washington-based Orkand Corp., Mr. Gorbachev is given credit for having devised a complex and multifaceted strategy that confronts the heroic Afghan guerrillas with enormous problems.

Entitled *The Soviets in Afghanistan: Adapting, Reappraising and Settling In* and dated June 10, 1986, this open-source analysis serves to confirm the administration's secret intelligence estimates that the Soviets are succeeding gradually and at considerable cost in establishing a permanent presence.

A sign of the increasing sophistication of the Gorbachev strategy is the differentiated approaches that the Soviets now take toward Afghanistan's four major regions.

In the north, next to Soviet Central Asia, the scorched-earth tactic has been suspended, and the authority of the Afghan puppet regime is being expanded beyond the cities into the countryside with the help of Moslem clergy who have been won over to the government's side.

While bypassing and isolating the resistance in the mountainous central region, the Soviets are working closely with their new strongman in Kabul, Mr. Najibullah, to exploit the

tribal rivalries in the east along the Pakistan border. Once a minor tribe has been subverted by gifts of money and Kalashnikov rifles, its local militia can be used to ambush and destroy the guerrilla supply convoys.

By depopulating the countryside where the guerrilla supply-lines operate, the Soviets deny the *mujahideen* the food and information that friendly farmers used to give, and Soviet special forces transported by helicopters have greatly increased the cost, danger, and difficulty of logistical support.

In the southern region that borders on Iran and Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, the Soviet troops show real signs of demoralization. Soviet military operations in the cities of Herat and Kandahar emphasize indiscriminate bombardment to force depopulation, and the Soviets seem content to settle for a holding action in this area.

Finally, according to the Orkand study, Mr. Gorbachev is exploiting every conceivable vulnerability to bring maximum pressure to bear on the Pakistan government in order to close down the vital supply lines that carry arms and ammunition through its territory to the *mujahideen*. In order to intimidate Pakistani officials, there have already been more than 500 cross-border violations in 1986, as compared to 250 in the whole of the previous year.

To raise the price to the Pakistani government of its involvement in the war, the Soviets and the Kabul regime's secret police are subsidizing dissident tribes on the Pakistan side of the border with some success. Terrorist bombings in the border towns are designed to increase Pakistani resentment against the 3 million Afghan refugees.

Within the Reagan administration, there is a tendency to accept as accurate the tentative conclusion of the Orkand report that after six years of heroic struggle the tide may be gradually turning against the *mujahideen*. As one key Reagan official explained, "The war is not costing the Soviets enough and the prospective strategic benefits for them are large."

On the Hill, where the Orkand report is circulating, there is concern

that the courage of the Afghans has won for us an opportunity to help them ~~regain their freedom~~ and that ~~to fail to take advantage of this~~ chance is to give the Soviets a major strategic victory.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, Republican of Utah, and Sen. Gordon Humphrey, Republican of New Hampshire, are preparing to question the administration on what more can be done, while there is still time. There is widespread congressional dissatisfaction with the fact that the Afghan guerrillas are still not receiving first-rate weapons for defense against the Soviet planes and helicopters. There is strong support for personal presidential intervention to reassure the government of Pakistan against Soviet threats, if that is what it takes to persuade them to permit the delivery of effective arms.

Although Reagan officials deny its validity, there is also strong congressional criticism of the extent to which responsibility for the Afghan operation is divided and diffused among State, Defense, CIA, AID, and USIA, with no one clearly in charge.

There is like to be a rising demand for a single competent coordinator, located in the White House, to see that deadlines are met and bureaucratic roadblocks are broken.